

Prior Learning Assessment in the US: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: Earning a college degree offers many benefits but requires time and money. Prior learning assessment (PLA) saves time and money by translating prior learning into college credit. This systematic literature review examined peer reviewed journal articles about PLA from the last decade. The research design used systematic literature review procedures to identify articles, collect data using the matrix method, and analyze data using thematic coding. Findings included journals publishing PLA articles, authorship, publication years, underlying empirical studies, and six major themes: the big picture, higher education changing PLA and PLA changing higher education; equity and access; program overviews; approaches, methods, and processes; and quality assessment.

Keywords: prior learning assessment, PLA, non-traditional students

Many Americans dream of a college degree and earning one offers multiple benefits. College graduates have access to a greater number of occupations and wider range of careers and enjoy better employment rates, earnings, employee benefits, and job security and satisfaction (Cherrstrom & Boden, 2018; Ma et al., 2016; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). Pursuing a college degree, however, requires time and money (Bowers & Bergman, 2016), and students must overcome such challenges.

Prior learning assessment (PLA) can make the difference between earning or not earning a college degree (Boden et al., 2019). Using assessment testing or competency portfolios, PLA documents college-level learning gained outside the classroom for academic credit (Klein-Collins & Wertheim, 2013). According to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL, 2010), outside the classroom includes learning in the workplace and military, from travel and hobbies, and through civic activities and volunteer service. Benefits include reduced tuition costs, greater student persistence, and shorter time-to-degree, especially for non-traditional students and underserved populations (Klein, 2017). Students with PLA credit have higher graduation rates than those without, irrespective of academic ability, age, financial aid, gender, grade point average, and race-ethnicity (CAEL, 2010). PLA merits further examination.

The purpose of this review was to examine the academic literature related to PLA in the US. Several research questions guided the review: Where, when, and how many peer reviewed journal articles about PLA have been published in the last 10 years? What institutions and organizations do published authors represent? How many articles are based on empirical studies? What PLA-related findings and results do authors examine and discuss?

Research Design for Systematic Literature Review

Systematic literature reviews contribute to current research by studying themes, gaps, and synergies regarding a specific subject (Booth et al., 2012). To identify articles, search criteria

included *prior learning assessment* in the article abstract, peer reviewed journal articles, and articles published during the last decade in English. The search initially yielded 135 publications, but after eliminating duplicates and those not meeting inclusion criteria, resulted in 47 journal articles.

For data collection, we used the matrix method using an Excel spreadsheet to systematically capture data (Garrard, 2014). Each row summarized one article, and columns organized data related to journals. For data analysis, we read the data in their entirety and examined data related to the journal, article, and underlying study with special attention devoted to abstracts. Based on the latter, two of us independently, inductively, and initially coded each article for primary article purpose. As reliability and validation strategies, we held four coding sessions to test and reach inter-coder agreement and categories (Creswell & Poth, 2017). We then read articles, one category at a time, finalizing coding and categories and identifying major findings.

Findings

Major findings included journals publishing about PLA, authorship, publications by year, underlying empirical studies, and six major themes. Sixteen journals published 47 articles about PLA during the last decade with three to eight publications each year. The 47 articles represented 65 unique author perspectives, predominately affiliated with higher education institutions. Only 11 articles had underlying empirical studies but collectively represented quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Finally, the six major themes comprised the big picture, higher education changing PLA and PLA changing higher education; equity and access; program overviews; approaches, methods, and processes; and quality assessment.

Discussion of Findings

This section discusses journals publishing about PLA, author perspectives, few underlying empirical studies, and six primary themes.

Journals Publishing About PLA

Academic journals play an important role in a discipline's history, parameters, knowledge base and support the process of new knowledge joining the body of existing knowledge (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Although not considered a discipline, we deepen our knowledge by examining when and where articles with new PLA knowledge have joined the existing body of knowledge. During the last decade, 16 journals published 47 articles about PLA with annual publications ranging from three to eight articles over the decade. One journal, the *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, represented half of all publications with 24 articles in nine of the decade's years. These findings indicate continued interest in PLA across the decade and identify journals with aims and scopes encompassing PLA.

Author Perspectives

Along with journal editors and reviewers, authors support new knowledge joining the body of existing knowledge (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Thus, discerning an author's perspective is

critical in examining academic literature. This review's 47 articles represented 65 unique author perspectives, predominately affiliated with higher education institutions. Although not surprising given the emphasis on publishing in higher education, PLA can benefit from author perspectives from nonprofits, businesses, and governments. These findings illustrate the critical role of higher education institutions in PLA, especially public institutions, and identify an opportunity for private institutions and other organizations.

Few Underlying Empirical Studies

Empirical research derives knowledge from experience based on the observation or measurement of a phenomenon (PennState University Libraries, 2020). In this review, less than one-quarter of articles were based on empirical studies. These findings illuminate a gap in the literature regarding published empirical studies examining PLA and opportunities for future research.

Major Themes

This review identified six major themes related to PLA. We will briefly discuss each theme using examples from the literature.

The big picture comprises six articles addressing foundational, historical, or broad-based topics. In the first of two articles, Travers (2012) traced the history of PLA in North American adult higher education from the 1970s to 2012. PLA grew in popularity during this time, and most published research centered on institutional practices as well as institutional and student learning outcomes. In the second article, Travers (2013) concluded institutions can measure the effectiveness of their PLA programs by assessing the interrelationships across five factors— institutional mission and commitment, institutional support, PLA program practices, PLA evaluator training program, PLA program feedback and evaluation. The articles in this theme suggest PLA is mature, versatile, and adaptive, pivoting and evolving to serve the needs of adult learners and the workforce.

Higher education is changing PLA, and PLA is changing higher education. Six articles comprise this theme, illustrating a symbiotic change relationship between PLA and higher education. In 2011, Kamenetz discussed the transformation of higher education through PLA, including the addition of open-network courses (e.g., Kahn Academy, MIT's Open Courseware) for PLA and quicker, more affordable degrees. The author discussed Empire State College's positive return on PLA investment, CAEL's work to extend PLA to additional universities through the LearningCounts program, and the rise and opportunity presented by free, open-network instructional courses for PLA. Agreeing with Kamenetz, Boilard (2011) further concluded PLA challenges the status quo and, thus, examined critical public policy issues for higher education including do-it-yourself education and PLA regulations. The articles in this theme indicate a symbiotic change relationship between higher education and PLA with opportunities to adapt to participatory societal shifts and capitalize on opportunities to synthesize learning across emerging options.

PLA supports *equity and access* for learners pursuing a college degree. Four articles comprise this theme. Focusing on students of color, Leaker and Boyce (2015) purported PLA is "more

than a mechanism of access; it can and must be a practice of equity” (p. 204). Noting higher graduation rates for students of color with PLA credit, they advocated different approaches for different racialized communities and designed the Women of Color and PLA workshops using critical race research. In 2017, Bergman and Herd identified the challenges military members face in transitioning to the civilian workforce, such as required education to gain civilian employment. PLA offers a bridge between military and academic knowledge, assisting active duty and veteran students. The authors highlighted military learners in transition, specific pathways for students, and implications for theory and practice in human resource development. The articles in this theme illuminate the opportunities for PLA to support equity and access and for institutions to create inclusive spaces and structures for special populations of learners.

Twelve articles provide *PLA program overviews* at 11 institutions, and sub-themes included numerous benefits to students participating in PLA and tools and best practices other institutions might adopt. Overall, PLA provides a quicker and less expensive path to graduation and develops important skills. Average credit awards for PLA ranged from 10 credit hours at Charter Oak State College (Adams & Wilder, 2016) to more than 30 credit hours at SUNY Empire State College (Kerr, 2013). Klein (2017) reported students at Capella University saved an average of \$4,320 by participating in PLA. Articles also shared tools and best practices other institutions might adopt to improve PLA. The articles in this theme illustrate the wide variety of PLA programs offering numerous benefits to students and offer best practices for other programs to consider.

PLA uses a variety of *approaches, methods, and processes*. Eleven articles comprise this theme. According to Popova and Clougherty (2014), institutions typically choose between course-match (i.e., students apply for PLA credits to match learning to specific courses or outcomes) and non-course-match PLA models. The authors suggested competency-based learning as an assessment framework, offering the advantages of course-match and non-course-match without the disadvantages. However, defining the competency level, for example from baseline to mastery, remains the challenge. For non-course-match, Lambe (2011) described a writing method for the PLA essay facilitating a shift from what students experienced and accomplished to what they learned. The articles in this theme illustrate the variety of PLA approaches, methods, and processes and offer yet additional resources for those beginning or enhancing PLA programs or practices.

Quality assessment, the final major theme, comprises eight articles discussing assessment of programs, assessment of prior learning, or student outcomes and perceptions. For the latter, three articles situated at Middle Tennessee State University with one common author; we provide two examples here. Rust and Brinthaup (2017a; 2017b) published two articles describing the underlying portfolio course and reported survey results regarding the perceptions and experiences of students who complete the course. Students reported improved academic skills, increased self-confidence and awareness, positive affective responses toward the course and portfolio, and whether participating in the online or hybrid course format, enhanced feelings of inclusion in the university. The articles in this theme provide examples of assessment for programs and prior learning along with student outcomes and perceptions. Such examples may offer resources to those beginning or enhancing PLA programs and practices. Collectively, the findings from this review offer implications and inform future research.

Implications and Future Research

This review offers implications for theory and practice and informs future research. For theory, the review adds a systematic examination of the academic literature on PLA in the US over the past 10 years. The review illustrates continued interest in PLA and adds synthesized findings. Such findings include the big picture perspective and context, illustrate the symbiotic relationship between higher education and PLA, illuminate opportunities for those in marginalized and special populations, highlight specific PLA programs, include multiple approaches, methods, and processes, and describe examples of quality assessment.

For practice, this review documents journals publishing and authors writing about PLA and articles offering PLA information, resources, best practices, and collaborative activities. For PLA administrators, this review provides knowledge and numerous examples of PLA practice in single institutions and across systems. These examples provide opportunities to strategically begin new or enhance existing PLA programs, build on CAEL standards, benchmark accomplishments, and glean new approaches, best practices, methods, processes, and tools. For students, PLA offers numerous benefits and supports equity and access for those in marginalized and special populations. For assessors, the review illuminates the importance of assessment for programs and prior learning, including student voices and achievement of learning outcomes.

Future research opportunities include more empirical studies, replicating this review beyond the US, and further examination of topics. PLA will benefit from more empirical studies to examine assessment models and tools, interventions, overall results, and the experiences of stakeholders—students, instructors, assessors, and administrators. Future research opportunities also include replicating this review beyond the United States. Such research, along with this review's findings and implications, will provide benefits to all PLA stakeholders, especially nontraditional students pursuing the American dream of a college degree.

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